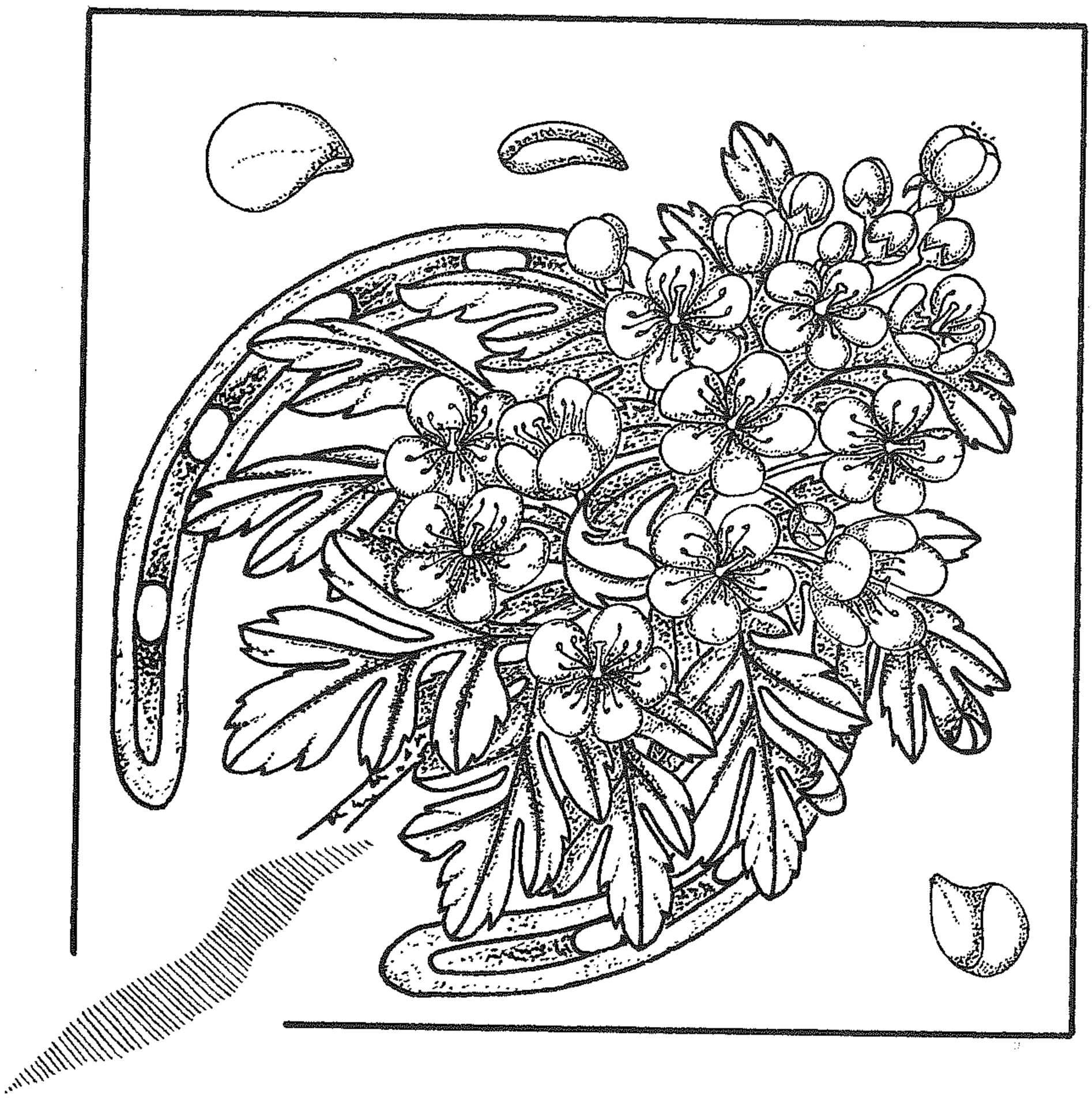
UNLUCKY PLANTS

A folklore survey



Compiled by Roy Vickery

UNLUCKY PLANTS

Folklore Society Folklore Surveys 1

Unlucky Plants

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Introduction

Between March 1982 and October 1984 members of the Folklore Society conducted a survey of plants which are believed to produce misfortune if picked or brought indoors. Information was received from all parts of the British Isles, and, in all, some 524 items, covering 90 species of plants, were received. It should be noted that these figures include a number of items concerning other aspects of plant-lore. Several correspondents sent a mass of miscellaneous material, not necessarily relevant to the survey, which, never the less, has been sorted and included in the totals given.

Two typescripts of all the accumulated info-mation have been prepared, one of these is housed in the Folklore Society's Archives at University College London, and the second copy will eventually be deposited in the Botany Library of the British

Museum (Natural History), London. The Society's Committee is grateful to all those who contributed in any way to the survey's success. As the survey was the first of its kind to be conducted by the Society for many years, it was pleasing to realise the extent of general interest in projects like this, and a series of similar surveys is being planned.

As far as possible the results presented below are arranged alphabetically according to the scientific (Latin) name of the plants involved. An index of common names is provided on pp. 89-91 Each section is headed by its subject's scientific name, followed by relevant common names, and, in brackets, the number of items received concerning the plant. This is followed by a representative selection of the information received concerning the plant, and, where possible, an attempt to analyse this information.

Plants about which information was received, but which are omitted from the main part of the work, are listed in an appendix on pp. 83-84

RESULTS

Acacia spp. (especially A. dealbata Link), MIMOSA, WATTLE (4)

My mother was very superstitious about flowers: may blossom, lilac and mimosa. .... The mimosa was considered a forewarning of a disaster, as I found to my cost when I purchased a bunch out of my first week's earnings and it was promptly thrown in the dustbin (much to my disgust), but I never could find out why.

(from Mrs E.M.Jones of Bayswater, London, July 1983).

Acacia blossom (what you call mimosa in England, but known as wattle in Australia) is called unlucky in parts of Australia. Possibly because it does not last for long after being picked. .. .. There are even people who believe it is unlucky to plant a specimen in their gardens. A belief which is the cause of much hilarity in Australia, as it is, after all, our National Emblem, and we call ourselves fortunate in living

in the Lucky Country!

(from Mrs Pauline Tully of Nicholson, Victoria, Australia, July 1983).

As suggested in the second item above, mimosa is probably considered 'unlucky' indoors because its flowers soon fall and cause a mess.

Aethusa cynapium L., FOOL'S PARSLEY, MOTHER DIE (1)

Fifty -one years ago, I picked some wild flowers for my mother who was ill and my grandmother was caring for us; as I approached the house my old gran said 'Don't bring those "Mother Die" into the house, they are bad luck', so sadly they went into the bin (my mother passed away a few weeks after).

(from Mr P.E. Turner of Shavington, Cheshire; received from Brian Rich, March 1982).

It is probable that the plant intended here is Anthriscus sylvestris, q.v.

Anthriscus sylvestris (L.) Hoffm., COW PARSLEY, MOTHER DIE, QUEEN ANNE'S LACE (13)

Never give cow parsley to your mother, or she will die.

(from Dr Jacqueline Simpson, who had been told this by a woman, aged 35-40, at Lancing, Sussex in May 1977).

Don't bring cow parsley into the house, because snakes will follow it.

(from Mercer Simpson, who had been told this by his 87-year-old mother-in-law of St Bride's-Super-Ely in the Vale of Glamorgan, October 1982).

As a child in Yorkshire, we would never pick the tallish, very small white flowers that grew by the wayside. They were very pretty, tall, graceful plants, and many times I was tempted to pick them, but was told not to as it was called 'Stepmother's Blessing' or 'Mother Die'. Needless to say, as I was very fond of my mother, I did not wish to acquire a stepmother, which was what would happen I was informed if I picked them. Needless to say this wild plant flourishes very

well and did so when I was very young.

Many years later, I went to live in Norfolk, and saw this same plant was very prolific at the roadside grass verges, and when I asked the locals what they called it, they said 'Queen Anne's Lace', and they said they had not heard the Yorkshire name for it.

(from Mrs J. Alcock of Ashley, Shropshire, received from Brian Rich, March 1983).

Cow Parsley: my mother called it 'Kill your Mother Quick' and would never allow it in the house - or she would die. 'Queen Anne's Lace', generally understood to refer to its lace-like appearance, but also to her (Queen Anne's) tragic child losses.

(from Mrs Betty Loring of Witham, Essex - recalling her childhood spent in the Chigwell, Ongar and Upminster areas of Essex - May 1983).

Of 70 Accrington schoolchildren (11-14-year-olds) who answered a questionnaire, 49 mentioned the saying 'cow parsley - mother die'. A variety of possible explanations were given. In nearby

Nelson, none of the children I spoke to knew of the saying.

(from Mrs Susan Allonby of Nelson, Lancashire, August 1983).

It is difficult to explain why this attractive flower should be the focus of such beliefs. Perhaps the shedding of its small petals ensured that house-proud women would not welcome it indoors. It is also possible that all white-flowered members of the parsley family are regarded as being somewhat suspect because of their resemblance to hemlock (Conium maculatum L.), which is one of the most dreaded poisonous plants:

Cow Parsley - Widely in Norfolk called Hemlock, and very unlucky to pick and take indoors, though in one village in which we lived some years ago, the children called it 'Mother Die'. This is undoubtedly a case of mistaken identity. Though not to my knowledge widespread in Suffolk, many years ago I remember hearing a village lady referring to Cow Parsley as 'that old Humlick'.

(from Alec Bull of East Tuddenham, Norfolk, October 1984).

In the main part of their Dictionary of English Plant-Names (1878-1886), Britten and Holland (:342) record:

> Mother Dee Lychnis diurna Sibth. [Silene dioica (L.) Clairv.], red campion - W. Cumb. Dee is the north-country pronounciation of die. There is a superstition amongst Cumberland children that if they pluck the flower some misfortune will happen to their parents. The same is said in Yorkshire of Veronica chamaedrys L., but the name does not seem, as far as we know, to be extended to that plant.

In the appendix to the same work (:555), it is noted that in Cheshire the name is also given to the Upright Hedge-Parsley (Torilis japonica (Houtt.)DC.). Thus, it would appear that the name Mother Die was not widely given to members of the parsley family, and the belief associating the gathering of cow parsley with the death of one's mother was unknown,

at the time when the Dictionary was being compiled. However, a number of other names listed by Britten and Holland (:567) demonstrate that cow parsley was considered inauspicious. These names include: Devil's Oat-meal, Devil's Parsley, and Naughty Man's Oat-Meal.

Arum maculatum L., CUCKOO PINT (2)

> When we were very young at school (and innocent) we used to say you girls should never touch a cuckoo pint; if you did you'd become pregnant. Where that silly idea started I do not know.
>
> (from Mrs Elsie Vickery, aged 58, of Thorncombe, Dorset, March 1982).

This belief is probably suggested by the somewhat phallic-shaped spadix of the flower, which led to cuckoo pint being considered to be an aphrodisiac. Thus, in his play Loves Metamorphosis published in 1601, John Lyly, who used the plant's older name of Wake Robin, wrote: 'They have eaten so much of Wake Robin, that they cannot sleep for love.' (Grigson: 469).

CACTI (1)

Cacti are considered unlucky inside the house in Hungary.

My aunt emigrated to England from Hungary and started a collection of cacti. Her sister came to visit her and was horrified to see the cacti. My aunt assured her that it was only a Hungarian superstition that cacti are unlucky. A few weeks after her visit to England her sister died. My aunt threw out all her plants when she heard the bad news, and she never allows one in the house now.

(from Mrs Heda Goss of Golders Green, London, May 1982).

For records of cacti being considered unlucky in England see: Deane and Shaw: 135, and Porter: 43.

Caltha palustris L., KINGCUP, MARSH MARIGOLD, MAY FLOWER (2)

Lilac, dandelions, waterlilies, kingcups, apple blossom - not to be brought indoors, but this a general inhibition, not associated with death.

(from Philip Adams, who was told this by Mrs Elizabeth Roper, who was born in 1894 and spent the early part of her life near Wareham Dorset, August 1982).

I thought you might like to hear that in Ireland it was thought unlucky to bring May Flowers (like buttercups) which grow wild in the Irish countryside and especially in marshy ground, into the house before May. The old people used to say it was 'lucky' to pick them and place them in bunches on the outside of your windowsill, but not inside. Sometimes we, as children, would gather them and bring into the kitchen, and we would be severely scolded for doing such a thing. Once when I cheekily asked why, I was told, in a rather angry voice, that 'they weren't lucky'.

However once May had arrived, you could bring them indoors without any misfortune threatening you.

(from Mrs M. Fitzpatrick of Bracknell, Berkshire, April 1984).

Two different traditions are represented here. In the first, kingcups, which follow waterlilies in the list, are presumably said to be unlucky to discourage children from venturing into the boggy areas in which the plants grow. In the second, the belief that the flowers should not be brought indoors before May relates to such superstitions as those which forbid the buying of a pram before a baby arrives, or the decorating of the house before Christmas Eve. For an account of marsh marigolds being used as May Day decorations in the Isle of Man, see Garrad: 76.

Capsella bursa-pastoris (L.) Medic., SHEPHERD'S PURSE (2)

'Mother Die': If you pick shepherd's purse your mother will die - associated with the plucking of the heart-shaped capsules. Perth (Invergowrie), 1950's onwards; family tradition.

(from Bob and Heather Press of Stevenage, Hertfordshire, May 1982).

According to Britten (: 159), during his childhood in Chelsea schoolboys would offer a plant of shepherd's purse to an unsuspecting playmate, and ask him to remove one of its heart-shaped seed-pods, when he had done this, he would be accused of 'picking his mother's heart out'. This prank was said to be widespread throughout England and northern Europe.

Chrysanthemum morifolium Ramat., CHRYSANTHEMUM (8)

According to an informant of Italian origin, living in Kettering, Northamptonshire: Chrysanthemums not brought into the house because of association with funerals, cemeteries.

(from E.R. Kendrick of Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire, March 1982).

My husband would never grow chrysanthemums; he came from Chinley, Derbyshire.

(from Mrs Irene Venon of Alveston, Derby; received from Brian Rich, March 1983).

My hairdresser is an Italian, but she's married an Englishman and lived here for many years, so

she's picked up the English ways. But her mother from Italy, who was staying here, was very upset when the hairdresser was given some chrysanthemums. 'They all wish you dead, they wish you dead' she said. In Italy chrysanthemums are used at funerals and are therefore associated with the dead, so if they are given to anyone it's sort of saying 'I wish you were dead'. The hairdresser said it was only an Italian superstition, and she didn't mind. She's been over here so long, and was so young when she married and came here that she doesn't mind.

(from Mrs Audrey J. Thomas of Streatham, London, April 1983).

It is clear that in some parts of Europe chrysanthemums are considered unlucky because of their association with the commemoration of the dead at funerals and on All Souls Day. For an account of chrysanthemums being used by London's Polish community to decorate graves on All Souls Day, see Vickery: 85.

Convolvulus arvensis L., **BINDWEED (3)**

'Young man's death': If you pick bindweed your boyfriend will die - seems to be associated with the rapid fading of the flower. Perthshire (Invergowrie), 1950's onwards.

(from Bob and Heather Press of Stevenage, Hertfordshire, May 1982).

I was brought up in Shropshire .... Thunder Flowers we always called Bindweed (Convolvulus) because if we picked these it would be sure to thunder before the day was out ....

(from Jean Owen of Bessacarr, South Yorkshire, April 1984).

In the nineteenth century the poppy (Papaver rhoeas L.) was the plant most commonly known as thunder flower, and it is probable that both it and bindweed received this name to discourage children for attempting to gather them and thereby cause damage to growing crops. The belief that the picking of bindweed causes the death of one's boyfriend does not appear to have been previously recorded.

Crataegus spp., HAWTHORN, MAY, WHITETHORN (123).

Children in Shepherd's Bush who made grottoes [in c. 1920] would not use lilac or hawthorn blossoms, both of which were considered unlucky, to decorate them.

(from Mrs Hoare of East Bedfont, Middlesex, September 1978. For an account of the childhood activity of grotto-building, see Vickery & Vickery (1977)).

Just before the last war, I stayed for a brief spell at a boarding house in Torquay, I was a young teenager and had previously never given superstitions of any kind a thought. However, one day I picked a lovely spray of fragrant hawthorn blossom to give to my landlady thinking she would be as pleased as I was with the beautiful flowers, alas, as soon as she caught sight of them she turned on me. I can still see her angry face. 'Throw them out at once' she shouted 'You are bringing a funeral in the house.' I was amazed and shocked as you can imagine at the

hostile reception, and she kept harping on the incident, her husband was poorly, her mother would throw me out (as well as the hawthorn), etc., etc.

(from Christina Gunner of Worthing, Sussex, August 1982).

Hawthorn (may) if picked could result in a dead child.

(from Miss Jeanne Boyle of Blurton, Stoke-on-Trent; received from Brian Rich, March 1983).

When I was a child (I am seventy-three) it was considered unlucky to bring hawthorn blossom into the house. Our old doctor, who was then about eighty, said that he thought the superstition had arisen because at the time of the year when may blossom was out there was often a lot of chest and throat ailments because of the pollen, and so people connected their ill health with hawthorn or may blossom that was often brought into the house for decoration. Also people may have connected it with the unlucky

month of May, e.g.:

Marry in May and you'll rue the day.
Wash your blankets in May, and you'll wash the master of the house away.

(from Mrs Zena E. Barnett of Audley, Stoke-on-Trent; received from Brian Rich, March 1983).

My parents always said it was very unlucky to bring may blossom into the house. On three occasions as a child I brought some into the house, each time I was rushed to hospital, seriously ill, within a week. .... Dad's explanation was that Christ's crown of thorns was made of hawthorne.

(from Mrs Margaret Hadfield of Mickleover, Derby; received from Brian Rich, March 1983).

When I moved to a house in rural Cheshire, the farmer from whom I bought the house mentioned just two flowers which should never be cut:

i) May flower: because if you did you would not get an apple crop as you would be depriving the bees of a supply of pollen.

ii) Honeysuckle: because if you did you would not get a second crop of hay.

The farmer would not even allow anyone to cut these two flowers. It seemed to be the actual cutting of them which did the damage. The farmer was George Faulkner of Wroughton Moor - prize fruit-grower.

(from Mrs Winifred Evans of Newcastle-under-Lyme, Staffordshire; received from Brian Rich, March 1983).

When I was a child, living in Sandiacre, Derbyshire (1952-1958), I well remember being told by my mother that my younger sister and I should not bring may flowers into the house as they brought bad luck. To bring them into the house would not only bring bad luck, but would ensure that it would rain during the summer months.

(from John Robson of Hartsay Hill, Derbyshire; received from Brian Rich, March 1983).

My childhood was spent in the Chigwell, Ongar Upminster areas of Essex:

May, Crataegus monogyna .... must not be brought into the house, this time not necessarily death, but most certainly illness. It was not lucky to even sit under a may hedge in flower, but quite safe otherwise.

(from Mrs Betty Loring of Witham, Essex, May 1983).

I still remember being terrified as a child of about five when told (after the event) that to carry May blossom indoors was certain to cause the death of one's mother - indeed the blossom was locally known as 'Mother-die'.

I learnt of the superstition when we lived in the village of Flixton, now a suburb of Manchester about 1958. .... Fortunately, I can tell you that the superstition proved without foundation as today, twenty-five years later, my mother is still fit and well .... though I never chanced bringing a second bunch of blossom across the threshold.

(from John Holt of Chiswick, London, July 1983).

70 Accrington schoolchildren who answered a questionnaire on unlucky flowers did not mention hawthorn.

(from Mrs Susan Allonby of Nelson, Lancashire, September 1983).

I was born and brought up on a farm in southern Ireland (Longford). Forbidden flowers - plants etc. - as I remember from preparing May Altars: .... Cutting a lone (single) hawthorn bush - death/illness.

(from Mrs Colette Prendergast of Southfields, London, April 1984).

And when I was only a little older, having climbed to the top of a hedge to gather a bunch of white hawthorn - and being told that these were very unlucky, that the youngest in the family would die! And having the fright of my life. And yet, I must confess that their scent

and shape charmed me. Thankfully, no one died!

(from Elsie Morgan of Bow Street, Dyfed, March 1984; translated from the Welsh and communicated by staff of the Welsh Folk Museum).

As the survey has shown, hawthorn is the most widely feared plant in the British Isles. Some writers have claimed that this fear derives from memories of pagan May celebrations in which a May Queen was crowned with hawthorn blossoms before she was ritually slaughtered (Maple: 31). Needless to say, there is no evidence to support such speculations.

Several correspondents associate may blossom with Marian devotions during the month of May:

Superstition about May dates from the times when Catholics were persecuted for their faith.

During the month of May - which was dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary - May blossoms were used to decorate the little shrines which Catholics made in their homes in her honour.

If anti-Catholic officials saw May blossom

being carried into a house, they recognised the household as a Catholic one and acted accordingly. Hence, to bring these flowers into a house brought 'bad luck' to the owners.

(from Mrs Mary Hunt of East Grinstead, Sussex, published in The Sunday Express, 16 May 1982).

However, history does not support such ideas. According to Marina Warner (: 281): 'May became Mary's month only in the eighteenth century, in Naples, whence it spread to Italy, to Ireland, and all over the Catholic world, encouraged chiefly by the Jesuits.' Similarly, in a letter dated 26 June 1982, the Guardian of the Franciscan Friary at Portishead wrote:

In fact 'May Devotions' were only introduced into this country in the middle of the nineteenth century by an Italian priest, Dr Gentili. They were resented for a while as a 'foreign innovation'. The connection between May and Mary was later fostered in the Catholic Schools which developed their own quasi-liturgy with hymns,

processions, crownings, etc., none of which had any place in the official liturgy of the Church although parochial clergy were often inveigled into taking part.

Perhaps it is more useful to consider the scent of the hawthorn flower, which Sylvia Plath referred to in one of her poems as 'the death-stench of the hawthorn'. In 1866 a correspondent to The Gentleman's Magazine recorded the 'popular notion' held by country cottagers that the scent of hawthorn flowers was exactly 'like the smell of the Great Plague of London' (Gomme: 206).

Two species of hawthorn, which frequently hybridize, are native to the British Isles: the common hawthorn (Crataegus monogyna Jacq.) and the 'midland' hawthorn (C. laevigata (Poiret) DC., often referred to in the older literature as C. oxyacanthoides Thuill.). The observations made by the amateur botanist, the Rev. R.P. Murray, in a letter dated 21 May 1900 are relevant to our study:

When in Switzerland we had plenty both of

C. monogyna and C. oxyacanthoides: the latter flowering a week or two earlier than C.monogyna. But I often gathered a lot of C. oxyacanthoides for decorative purposes: and tho' in smell quite like the other form when gathered, it used to absolutely stink of putrid flesh soon after:- sometimes within half an hour. I do not remember that this ever occurred with C.monogyna. (Allen: 119).

More recently it has been shown that trimethylamine, one of the first products formed when animal tissues start to decay, is present in hawthorn flowers (Challenger: 266). Today, when many people die in hospital and corpses are not usually kept at home before burial takes place, we are not familiar with the smell of putrefying flesh, but our ancestors, who often had a very real fear of being buried alive and consequently kept a corpse at home for anything up to a week before burial, must have been fully aware of the odour of death. Consequently it is most unlikely that they would welcome hawthorn

blossom indoors. Trimethylamine is also present in cotton flowers, and it would be interesting to know if these too are prohibited indoors.

Digitalis purpurea L., FOXGLOVE (7)

Picking foxgloves was unlucky and they were absolutely forbidden inside a house as this gave witches/the devil access to the house.

Staffordshire (Tutbury), 1950's.

(from Bob Press of Stevenage, Hertfordshire, May 1982).

As children in Scotland in the late 1920's .... foxgloves were regarded in some way as dangerous, but I'm afraid I can't now remember if this was because of bad luck or because they were in some way harmful. I suppose that where warnings (even if mistaken) to children are concerned superstition is sometimes brought into play to reinforce these: my father as a very small child in Scotland in the 1870's was told there was a kelpie in the distillery dam in the village, which effectively

discouraged him from falling in.

(from Mrs Eleanor Brock of Oxford, July 1983).

The foxglove is regarded as unlucky on account of its magical associations, as are suggested by names such as Byssed Ellyllon (Friend/Ghost/Goblin Fingers), Menyg Ellyllon (Friend/Ghost/Goblin Gloves) and Menyg y Tylwyth Teg (Fairy Gloves).

(from Llywelyn Phillips of Aberstwyth, Dyfed 1983: communicated by Roy Saer of the Welsh Folk Museum, October 1984).

According to many writers (e.g. Britten & Holland: 192), the 'fox' of 'foxglove' is a corruption of 'folks', meaning 'fairies'.

Erica cinerea L., HEATHER (4)

My Grandfather (a Scottish Royalist) always said that white heather was unlucky because of its connection with the banishment of Bonny Prince Charles.

(from Dusty Roades of Towcester, Northhampt-

onshire August 1982).

My father was a Scot and we spent many summer holidays in the Highlands where we were not permitted to bring either heather or heath into the house, but on the other hand white heather was considered lucky.

(from Mrs Bernard Petre of St Aubin, Jersey, April 1984).

Filipendula ulmaria (L.) Maxim., MEADOWSWEET (5)

Eastbourne, Sussex, 1941 (wartime). I was a keen collector of wild flowers at that time and brought back large armfuls of exceptionally fine sprays of 'Queen of the Meadow', also known as 'Meadowsweet', I believe. I brought it into the house where my mother and I were staying as guests and met our hostess, a woman of fifty or more (unpleasant, petty-minded and very violent R.C. convert and very superstitious) who promptly told me not to bring it into the house. 'Why ever not?' Whereupon the woman nearly became crazy, she was

screaming at me in the end. Ghastly bad luck would descend on the house if I did; I thought it was too foolish for words and tried to persist in bringing it in. She was beside herself, and screamed that she would throw my mother and me out if I did. In the end my mother intervened and begged me to leave it outside. I kept one bit secretly to press for my collection and left the rest outside, frightful waste. The silly woman calmed down but talked of it for the rest of the evening, as far as I could see she was afraid of general disaster rather than death hitting the house ....

(from Jean Tsushima of Kensington, London, January 1983).

Meadowsweet has all the characteristics of plants which are considered 'unlucky': a sweet scent, creamy-coloured flowers, and small petals which fall creating a mess.

FLOWERS (8)

It is unlucky to pick up flowers which have been dropped on the ground (brings sickness to the house!).

(from Mrs Elinor M. Blow of Aberdovey, Gwynedd, July 1983).

This belief, which is frequently mentioned in works on folklore, probably dates from the time when the urban poor only saw flowers when they were bought for funerals.

FRUIT TREES (5)

In the Basingstoke district of Hampshire it was believed that war was foretold when fruit trees blossomed at unusual times.

(from Janet Thumwood of Maida Vale, London, March 1978).

My Grandmother told me, when I was very young, that it was unlucky to take into the house or indeed pick a flower that was 'blooming out of season'. Quite often an odd sprig of cherry or

plum will blossom in December or January because 'the devil has touched it' and he wants to bring his influence into the house.

(from Dusty Roades of Towcester, Northamptonshire, August 1982).

In addition to the above, a couple of correspondents recorded a general taboo on the picking and bringing indoors of any fruit blossom, 'for the obvious reason that cutting them will deplete the fruit crop'. The belief that fruit trees flowering out of season predict misfortune has been widely recorded, and is expressed in the couplet:

A blossom on the tree when the apples are ripe
Is a sure termination of somebody's life.

(Notes & Queries: 133).

Galanthus nivalis L., SNOWDROP (25)

I am a district Nursing Sister working in Lancashire, and the following story was related to me by an elderly patient at a farmhouse:

For many years her mother had refused to have snowdrops in the house, even though they

grew profusely in the orchard. Girls from east Lancashire towns were often employed to help in the large house and would ask permission to pick the flowers to take home on their day off. This they were allowed to do so as long as they left them in water on the doorstep.

After the old lady's death there was an occasion when a wedding party announced their intention, at short notice, of arriving to pay respects to an ailing relative. Snowdrops were brought in to decorate the tables, it being early in the year and no other flowers available so easily. Within three months the bridegroom was dead, and needless to say snowdrops have never since been brought into the house.

(from Lynda Bindless of Wiswell, Blackburn, April 1982).

My mother's family (Flintshire, N. Wales now Clwyd and Montgomeryshire connections) firmly hold that snowdrops brought into the house mean a death in the immediate family. This does not mean snow-

drops grown in bowls, but cut snowdrops brought inside.

(from the Rev. A.W. Ronald Hughes of Aberystwyth, Dyfed, January 1983).

I felt I must write and tell you how I feel about snowdrops. I hate and detest them, but hasten to add, I adore all other flowers, and am a member of a flower club.

My mother started it all by saying never pick them and take them indoors they are bad luck.

A few years ago my brother-in-law died of a brain tumour at the age of 35, as we were following the coffin to church both sides of the road were white with snowdrops.

Last January my father-in-law went into a private nursing home to die, he suffered until March. We visited him daily and outside his window there were thousands of the horrid things. As he lay suffering, we could only see <u>them</u> from the windows, it was awful. They are my unlucky flowers.

(from Mrs A.B. of Poringland, Norwich, March 1984).

It is strange that such an attractive and inoffensive flower should become the focus of such beliefs, and it has been suggested that the association of snowdrops with death results from the flower's resemblance to a shroud. Snowdrops are, of course, frequently found growing in old graveyards, hence it is probable that they were considered to be particularly appropriate flowers for planting on graves. The last item given above vividly shows how folk beliefs maintain their vigour.

Geranium robertianum L., HERB ROBERT (1)

Herb Robert was also called Snake Flower and was never picked because snakes would emerge from the stems.

(from Louise Rhodes of Newcastle-under-Lyme, Staffordshire, remembering her childhood in the village of Hardwicke, near Gloucester; received from Brian Rich, March 1983).

cf. Ulex europaeus, below.

Hedera helix L., IVY (10)

Holly and ivy must not be taken into the house until Christmas Eve and must be removed by January 6th.

(from Mrs Mellor of Boundary, Staffordshire, received from Brian Rich, March 1983).

Ivy should not be used in Christmas decorations. Holly was placed over shelves and in vases, but not ivy.

(from Mrs Betty Loring of Witham, Essex, May 1983 - recalling her childhood spent in the Chigwell, Ongar and Upminster areas of Essex).

Ilex aquifolia L., HOLLY (14)

Miss Joan Fox-Hawes, who has lived her whole life in Hove and Havant, states that in her experience farmers find it unlucky to cut holly, to the extent that they cut their hedges around it. (I had not myself noticed that in South Hampshire their current machinery is sensitive to that - or any other - consideration).

(from Philip Adams of Havant, Hampshire, August 1982).

Unlucky to bring holly into the house before Christmas Eve.

(from Mercer Simpson, who had been told this by his 87-year-old mother-in-law of St Brides-Super-Ely in the Vale of Glamorgan, October 1982).

Rose B. said that when her mother was taken ill it was in the summer, and Rose carried some holly indoors and put it up. Someone came to visit her mother, and told Rose it was all her fault that her mother was ill, as she'd brought in the holly. Rose said she was terribly terribly upset to think that she'd made her mother ill, as she was too young to think it rubbish, and she grieved about it for years and years, so she thinks all these things should be forgotten and not remembered.

(from Elsie Vickery of Thorncombe, Dorset, December 1982).

As usual we decoratedthe tractor trailer with holly and ivy (made to look like flowers with red crepe paper wrapped around the berries) and went carol singing. After three nights of singing a piece of holly fell on the trailer floor and Stewart F. (aged 9) picked it up and asked 'Please could I have it to take home?' I said 'Yes, of course, but if you come tomorrow when we take it all down, I'll give you some more to make a trimming', and he was so pleased, which we thought was funny for a country child. However a few minutes later he was back almost in tears, and threw the holly on the trailer floor, saying 'I can't have it as Mummy says it is unlucky and will not have it indoors'.

(from Elsie Vickery - see item above - January 1983).

We never brought holly into the house before Christmas morning as it was considered awful bad luck and it was always thrown out on January 6th.

(from Fred Jordan of Aston Munslow, Shropshire;

received from Brian Rich, March 1983).

A holly tree should never be cut down. Mrs Fay Mellor of Boundary, Staffordshire, told me of a farmer who wanted a holly tree cutting down. He knew he shouldn't do it, so he asked one of his labourers. The labourer refused in spite of being threatened with the sack.

Eventually the farmer found someone to cut the tree down who did not believe in 'Old Wives' Tales'. This person was dead within three months even though before cutting the tree he was prefectly healthy.

(from Brian Rich of Leek, Staffordshire, March 1983).

Holly bushes in your garden are definitely unlucky.

(from Mrs M. Fitzpatrick of Bracknell, Berkshire, referring to Co. Donegal, August 1984).

Despite the somewhat ambivalent material accumulated by the Survey, both holly and ivy are usually said by writers on plant-lore to have protective properties:

Both Holly and Ivy were plants with power, and they were specially suitable for protection in the dead of the year, although they were effective at all times and in many ways (Grigson:126).

Ligustrum ovalifolium Hassk., PRIVET (2)

I remember in about 1963, when we were living in South Shields, that my mother would not allow privet flowers in the house.

(from Mike Mullin of Ealing, London, May 1982).

Although it might at first appear that this prohibition was due simply to the objectionable smell of privet flowers, perhaps it is worth noting that during the first decade of the present century privet was associated with diptheria:

While I was in hospital I heard much gossip about the various sources, previously thought innocuous, from which you could now 'catch the fever': privet leaves; putting an iron key in your mouth; passing a smelly drain without a handkerchief to clap over your mouth and nose ..

.. (Rolph: 56).

Lilium spp. (especially L. longiflorum Thunb.), LILY (8)

Regal Lily. Never brought into the house, would bring death, but I remember as a child, late 30's and early 40's seeing them on the coffins of relatives who were awaiting burial.

(from Mrs Betty Loring of Witham, Essex, May 1983 - recalling her childhood spent in the Chigwell, Ongar and Upminster areas of Essex. Either the white-flowered Madonna Lily (L. candidum L.) or Easter Lily (L. longiflorum) is probably intended here rather than the pink-flowered Regal Lily (L. regale E.H. Wilson).

At Easter churches - or at least our church - are decorated with lilies - arum lilies, and mostly nowadays Lilium longiflorum - bought in memory of the dead.

(from Mrs Margaret Cannon of Purley, Surrey, April 1983).

White lilies are a sign of a funeral. Whilst in Malaya during the early 1950's the local Chinese 'gentry' had to be dissuaded from sending this particular flower to the local British Military Hospital, as they upset so many people.

(from Mrs M. Green of Chester, Cheshire, April 1984).

Although white lilies have at times been fashionable flowers at weddings, they are primarily associated with the commemoration of the dead, and consequently they are usually unwelcome at other times.

Lonicera periclymenum L., HONEYSUCKLE (5)

Flowers that are taboo in our house .... until recently my home was in Scotland .... Honeysuckle: never to be taken indoors; very unlucky for the family; it should not be worn either.

(from Ruth Glass of Apples, Switzerland, February 1983).

We went out to see Lily B. on Sunday night .... and she started off that her mother wouldn't have honeysuckle indoors as it brought sickness with it.

(from Elsie Vickery of Thorncombe, Dorset, February 1983).

A local, country fellow of this village was an amateur but knowledgeable herbalist. He said you should never bring honeysuckle indoors because it gave you a sore throat.

(from Annie May Pell of Capel Hendre, Dyfed, September 1983).

See also the belief, listed under Crataegus spp. above, that if honeysuckle is cut you will not get a second crop of hay.

Mandragora officinarum L., MANDRAKE (1)

There used to be this chemist - well pharmacist - in Aberystwyth - he was the top chemist in the town - who had a mandrake plant in his garden. When he died, about ten years ago, he bequeathed

it to the College Botanic Garden in his will. Quite a party of people gathered to remove the plant - my father was one of them - but they hesitated before digging it up, because it was supposed to be unlucky. They joked about getting a starving dog to pull it up, but the College gardener said he didn't worry, so he dug it up. He did so, and is still alive and happy.

(from Arthur Chater of Kew, Surrey, July 1984).

In classical times there was a great deal of superstition surrounding the digging of mandrake roots. One of these was that a root should be tied to a starving dog which would pull it up when enticed by having meat thrown towards it. It is probable that such ideas were invented by herb gatherers who wanted to protect their livelihoods (Stearn: 290).

Narcissus spp., DAFFODIL (2)

Unlucky to take daffodils into the house 'before the goslings are hatched'.

(from Dr Larch S. Garrad of the Manx Museum,

who was told this by Atholl Wilson, who was brought up in the Port St Mary/Cregneash area of the Isle of Man, and then - spring 1982 - in his seventies, April 1983).

Two of a group of 12 very elderly people meeting at Redhills Hospital, Exeter, had heard of daffodils being unlucky if brought into the house early in the morning - means there will be a death in the family. Later on in the day it is safe.

(from Mrs Margaret A. Valk of Exeter, Devon, July 1984).

For a discussion of the first item above, see below under Primula vulgaris.

Narthecium ossifragum (L.) Huds., BOG ASPHODEL (1)

Before I came to Shropshire I lived for 7 years in the Lake District. The fell farmers particularly feared Bog Asphodel in respect of their sheep as it was a plant which 'softened their bones'. I must say I came across very many dead beasts on my fell walks, tangled up in thorns, etc., but I

have been told that the belief that they could have been weakened first by the Bog Asphodel is sheer superstition.

(from Christina Gunner of Worthing, Sussex, September 1982).

Although it is not strictly relevant to the survey this item is of interest in that it shows the survival of a belief for over two centuries. The specific epithet ossifragum was given to bog asphodel by Linnaeus in his Species Plantarum of 1753, and is derived from the Latin os (bone) and frango (to break). The belief is, in fact, rather more than 'sheer superstition', as the acidic, boggy moorland on which the plant grows is unsuitable ground for sheep, which may well sicken if grazed on it.

Similarly, sundew (Drosera rotundifolia L.), which often grows with bog asphodel, was known in the seventeenth century as Red Rot, 'because it rotteth sheep' (Coles: 30).

Nuphar lutea (L.) Sm., DILLFLOWERS, YELLOW WATER LILY (1)

Lilac, dandelions, waterlilies, kingcups, apple blossom - not to be brought indoors, but this a general inhibition, not associated with death.

(from Philip Adams, who had been told this by Mrs Elizabeth Roper, who was born in 1894 and spent the early part of her life near Wareham, Dorset, August 1982. Later Mrs Roper confirmed that the waterlilies, which she knew as 'Dillflowers', were the yellow water lily).

This is apparently a case where an attractive flower growing in a potentially dangerous habitat has been dubbed as 'unlucky' to discourage children from gathering it.

Philadelphus coronarius L., MOCK ORANGE (5)

My other story concerns an elderly patient in this little nursing home (at Eastbourne, Sussex, 1941), a very sick old lady who had been in India nearly all her life as a wife of a soldier or

official. I used to go and talk to her .... However, I put my foot wrong with her as I marched into her room with a bunch of Philadelphus .... hoping to cheer her up. 'Take that out of my room!' was all the welcome I got! 'But it has such a lovely smell' I wailed, 'That's just what I can't stand she shrieked. 'If you leave it outside I'll tell you why I don't like it.' The story was that in her day in India Hindus put Philadelphus all over dead bodies before they were cremated, on account of the heat corpses were burnt very soon after death, but in the really hot season four or five hours, which is what it took to arrange a cremation, often wasn't quick enough, and the mock orange's powerful scent masked the smell of decay.

(from Jean Tsushima of Kensington, London, January 1983).

Primula vulgaris Huds., PRIMROSE (4)

We went out to see Lily B. on Sunday night .... and she started off that her mother wouldn't have honeysuckle indoors .... but the one she remembers best is never to look for early primroses, because if you pick them and take them into the house it affects the fertility of the eggs the hens are sitting on at the time, and however many primroses (and it's usually one or two at first) you pick that is the number of chicks (ducks or whatever) that will hatch out of each clutch. She has had many a 'clout around the yer (ear)' for that, but if her sister and her wanted to please their mother they would hunt around and try to find a nice lot (say a dozen or more Mrs. B. said) and then her mother would be really pleased. It seems as if Mrs B's mother really believed it.

(from Elsie Vickery of Thorncombe, Dorset, February 1983).

Of 70 Accrington schoolchildren (11-14-year-olds) who answered a questionnaire, 3 children mentioned that primroses should not be brought into the house, since they can cause illness.

(from Mrs Susan Allonby of Nelson, Lancashire, August 1983).

I have always heard that it was unlucky to take primroses indoors before April, particularly if one had fowl hatching!

(from Maura Walsh of Dromsally, Co. Limerick, August 1984).

Although the association between yellow spring flowers and poultry-keeping has been quite widely recorded (see, for example, Britten: 158, and Udal: 256), only the two examples given above and that quoted under Narcissus were recorded in the present survey. According to George Ewart Evans (: 68):

'Of course you had to bring at least thirteen primroses into the house. Do you bring less, it were no use; it didn't serve. Thirteen was the number - or more. It didn't matter if you had

more; but you dursn't have less.' The rationale of the custom was then immediately clear as one of the old people pointed out: thirteen is the number traditional to a clutch of eggs placed under a hen during the spring. Each yellow primrose was, therefore, the analogue of a young chick which would eventually emerge from the egg. If one grants that like produces like - an unquestioned assumption of the primitive mind either in Britain or in Borneo - it is folly then to bring in fewer primroses than you hope to have healthy young chicks.

Prunus spinosa L., BLACKTHORN (9)

I remember that in April 1948 when I was in the maternity home at Bishop Auckland, Co. Durham, my husband brought a spray of blackthorn into the ward for my enjoyment, to the great consternation of the nursing staff. Although the word 'death' was not actually mentioned, I think the term 'bad luck' was only used as a substitute out of

consideration for any patients who were within earshot. One nurse certainly mistook it for hawthorn, and could not be convinced that it was a different plant - it is possible that others also misidentified it, but my recollection is that both plants were highly suspect, and the blackthorn was thrown out.

(from Kathleen Hersom of Wolsingham, Co. Durham, May 1982).

It was considered to be bad luck to pick blackthorn and on no account was it to be taken into the house. A scratch from the thorns would cause blood poisoning. This was thought to be because Christ's crown of thorns was made from it.

(from Louise Rhodes of Newcastle-under-Lyme, Staffordshire, remembering her childhood in the village of Hardwicke, near Gloucester; received from Brian Rich, March 1983).

Blackthorn .... must not be brought into the house for if its petals dropped someone would

die.

(from Mrs Betty Loring of Witham, Essex, May 1983 - recalling her childhood spent in the Chigwell, Ongar and Upminster areas of Essex).

Blackthorn flowers were probably forbidden indoors because of the ease with which they lose their petals and cause a mess, and because of confusion with hawthorn.

RED AND WHITE FLOWERS (52)

I am a S.E.N. at St Lawrence's Psychiatric Hospital and when doing my training arranged flowers that visitors had brought in. On seeing what I had done the C/N was horrified, and quickly put some yellow flowers amongst my vase. On no account was I to put red and white flowers together again, as it meant death.

(From H.M. Briggs of Bodmin, Cornwall, May 1982).

More recently I have heard that red and white flowers are considered unlucky as funeral flowers .... I asked my florist a few months ago, when I was sadly ordering a funeral spray whether it was

true .... 'Oh yes' he said cheerfully, 'They are known in the trade as "Blood and Bandages" - the nurses hate them - say it is so unfeeling to send them if a person died in hospital.

(from Jean Tsushima of Kensington, London, January 1983).

As a Parish Priest in England and Wales over 40 years I have grown to fear, as a result of personal experience, red and white flowers on the Altar as usually followed by an unexpected death, even in parishes with only 4 or 5 funerals a year, e.g. Arthog Church - red and white on Altar seen at 7 p.m. Saturday, put on by elderly spinster. Next morning before 8 a.m. Celebration at Farbourne Church in same parish, 'Rector please pray for the soul of the Schoolmaster - he fell downstairs at 2 a.m. and broke his neck.' There are other similar cases known to me.

I am also coming, for a similar reason, to dislike artificial red and white flowers in houses.

(from the Rev. A.W. Ronald Hughes of Aberystwyth, Dyfed, January 1983).

Red and white flowers: must not have these together in the house or hospital as they represent blood and bandages.

(from Mrs Margaret Marvill of Shelton Lock, Derby; received from Brian Rich, March 1983).

Some years ago I was speaking at a meeting about superstitions .... and of course mentioned the general superstition about mixed white and red flowers in hospital wards. After the meeting a man from the audience came up to me and said 'You have explained something that has perplexed me for nearly 40 years.' He had been an orderly in a local American Military Hospital and on the printed instructions given to the orderlies was one forbidding bunches of mixed red and white flowers being allowed in the wards.

(from Joan M. Eltenton of Oxford, September 1983.

Lieutenant Colonel Robert Frank of the Centre of Military History, Washington, D.C., wrote

in August 1984: 'We regret that we have no information regarding such instructions in military hospitals. We suspect, however, that such instructions applied only to one particular hospital. We have checked with knowledgeable nursing personnel, and none is aware of this particular piece of folklore.')

The belief that red and white flowers should not be placed together in the same vase seems to be known in most hospitals, although several of our correspondents thought that the belief was unique to their own hospital. The most usual explanation is that the red flowers symbolize blood, and the white bandages. According to the Sunlight Almanac (1896), a dream of red and white flowers foretold death. Perhaps there is some connection between the fear of red and white flowers and the red and white stripes of a barber's pole:

The present-day barber's pole, one of the few surviving trade signs, represents the wand used in venesection, the two bandages and the barber's blood-letting dish. (Melling: 28).

Red and white flowers are not always considered inauspicious:

> At Whitsun many Anglican churches decorate with red and white flowers - the symbolism of the fire and the wind of the Holy Spirit.
>
> (from Marian Nevell of Catford, London, September 1984).

Chinese brides in Britain often carry bouquets of red and white flowers, and:

> Red and white are the colours of the City (of London), so when there are events at the Guildhall there are always masses of red and white carnations.
>
> (from John Rydon of The Daily Express, August 1983).

Rhus typhina L., STAG'S HORN SUMAC (1)

In Worcestershire, in the Bromsgrove area, there is a belief that the stagshorn sumach (Rhus), if growing in the garden of a house, 'is sure to bring' marital strife to the family living in the house. This was related to me by an old gardener who lived

near Bromsgrove, one Arthur Richards by name, who died in 1973 full of years. He lived until he was about 90 years of age. This belief, which notwithstanding more than fifty years of collecting such information from most parts of Scotland England and Wales, I have not encountered elsewhere, was firmly held by many other gardeners of my informant's generation.

> (from Dr D.A. Blacketer-Simmonds of Great Barr, Birmingham, October 1982).

This belief does not appear to have been previously recorded.

Rubus fruticosus L., agg., BLACKBERRY (6)

Blackberries should not be eaten after Michaelmas Day (29th September) as they have the devil in them after that. This has that much truth in it in that a fungus attacks the plants about then, I believe. Personally I don't eat them after that day because I imagine they are probably unpalatable! They are usually wet and nasty anyway.

(from Miss I.F. Gravestock of Stoke Bishop, Bristol, December 1982).

My grandmother and mother ('rural Somerset') knew of 'the blackberry superstition' - Never pick blackberries after Michaelmas Day because the Devil peeps over the hedges and blasts them.

(from Mrs Margaret Bromwich of Heathfield, Somerset, July 1983).

Blackberries should not be picked after November 1st (some say October 1st) so that the Devil may have his share.

(from Mrs C.I. Boyd Brent of Ashreigney, Devon July 1983).

I am sure you must already know the reason for not bringing hawthorn into the house - namely it is a symbol of the Crown of Thorns.

However, some years ago, before World War II, I was told by a friend who was then living in Caen, France, that the same reason, in that locality, applied to the blackberry, and therefore the fruit was not gathered.

Whether this custom still exists I cannot say.

(from Mrs Jean Oldaker of Cranbrook, Kent, July 1983).

'Never pick blackberries in October because the devil's in them.' The reason was said to be because he fell into a blackberry bush and cursed them.

(from Miss Hilda Smith, aged c. 80, of Reading, Berkshire, who learnt this from her mother, summer 1983).

The belief that blackberries should not be eaten after Michaelmas Day (29 September) or Old Michaelmas Day (10 October), because they become contaminated by the Devil on this date, has been widely recorded. In some areas it appears that blackberries were considered unwholesome at any time. Thus in 1912 it was recorded that around Ross-on-Wye in Herefordshire blackberries were believed to have 'the trail of the serpent' over them, and had not been eaten in the neighbourhood in former days

(Leather: 21).

Salix caprea L., PALM, SALLOW (1)

About seventy years ago, in Hampshire, it was thought unlucky to bring palm - flowering willow - indoors before Palm Sunday.

(from Mrs Gwendoline Thorley of Great Bookham, Surrey, October 1979).

Salix spp., WILLOW (1)

Of 70 Accrington schoolchildren (11-14-year-olds) who answered a questionnaire, 12 children mentioned that willow should not be burnt on Bonfire Night.

(from Mrs Susan Allonby of Nelson, Lancashire, August 1983).

Sambucus nigra L., ELDER, TRAMMAN (12)

It was said at Beckley that if you burn elder wood you will become bewitched. You never cut it down. In Wootton they say that the elder is a witch tree. You should not mend a wattle hedge with it, as it will give the witches power. If

you cut it, it will bleed. Elder was used to keep flies away and was sometimes tied to horses' heads for that purpose.

(collected by Mary Stanley Smith whilst lecturing to Oxfordshire W.I. groups in the 1950's received from Christine Bloxham of the Oxfordshire County Museum, January 1983).

According to a Manxman in his mid-sixties, c. 1975: unlucky to burn Tramman (elder), it is the fairies' tree.

(from Dr Larch S. Garrad of the Manx Museum, April 1983).

If you chop an elder tree or fell it, you should bow three times and say:

Old Woman, Old Woman,
Give me some of your wood
And when I am dead
I'll give you some of mine.

(from Christine Wenham and others of Whitwick, Leicestershire; received from Eric Swift, August 1983).

In Ireland it is considered lucky to have an elderberry bush grow near your house, especially if it is 'self-set'.

(from Mrs M. Fitzpatrick of Bracknell, Berkshire August 1984).

Collecting firewood from the hedges surrounding the cottage and returning happily laden, but being accused of bringing bits of elder into the house - it was considered unlucky to use these to light a fire.

And yet mother used elder leaves to make a pattern on the floor-bricks. Painting around them with red paint. Marking the cross with elder leaves. This was an old custom going back to her grandmother's time, so the custom had to be continued despite the time-consuming nature of the work. The old Welsh people, like those of other nations, must have believed that there was 'magic and special protection' in having elder nearby. An elder tree grew in every garden in bygone days, the flowers, fruit and leaves were

a handy source of medicine.

(from Elsie Morgan of Bow Street, Dyfed, March 1984: translated from the Welsh and communicated by the staff of the Welsh Folk Museum, October 1984).

The only unlucky plant which I have heard of is the Elder Tree, which the old people looked upon as unlucky. As I have heard the old people say it was unhealthy to have an elder tree growing near the house as it was often noted the inhabitants seemed more prone to T.B. or 'Consumption' as it was known in Ireland in the old days. However, as T.B. was rampant all over the country at that time, I don't know if this belief would have any significance. My own people however would not cut down an elder bush or burn it no matter how old or rotten it was. Nor allow an elder stick in the house, and it would be an unforgivable act to strike a child or even an animal with one. So I imagine the belief was fairly strong among the people.

(from Mrs Phyllis Graham of Kill Village, Co. Kildare, October 1984).

As the above quotes demonstrate, the elder is one of the most enigmatic plants in British folk tradition. On the one hand it is feared because of its association with witches and the old belief that it is the tree on which Judas Iscariot hanged himself, on the other, according to herbalists writing the 1940's (Quelch: 78 and Ransom: 55), elder is 'the healingest tree that on earth do grow' and has 'the unusual distinction of being useful in every part'. Although elder flowers have the scent and colour of several other 'unlucky' flowers, it appears that it is the wood, rather than the flowers, which is feared, and it is tempting to suggest that the various taboos which are attached to the plant were invented to protect a tree which was formerly of considerable economic value.

Sarothamnus scoparius (L.) Wimmer, BROOM (7)

If broom is brought indoors 'it sweeps someone out of the house'.

(from a member of the Tarring (Sussex) Townswomen's Guild; received from Dr Jacqueline Simpson, April 1983).

Don't bring any broom home and don't bring any may:

If you bring Broom into the house in May
It will sweep the family away.

(from Miss Hilda Smith, aged c. 80, of Reading, Berkshire, who learnt this from her mother, summer 1983).

Old ladies tell me that as children their grandmas would smack them for bringing indoors Catkins and Broom - the only reason given was that the flowers 'made a mess' - pollen falling, petals dropping, on a polished table.

(from Annie May Pell of Capel Hendre, Dyfed, September 1983).

Unless the explanation given in the final item above is adequate, this belief seems difficult to explain. The following story was published in the first volume of the Folklore Society's journal, in 1878 (Latham: 52):

> A poor girl, who was lingering in the last stage of consumption, but whose countenance had always lighted up with pleasure at the sight of flowers, appeared one morning so exceedingly restless and unhappy, after a fresh nosegay of gay spring flowers had been laid on her bed, that I asked her if the scent of them was disagreeable to her 'Oh! no' she exclaimed, 'they are very nice indeed to smell, but yet I should be very glad if you would throw away that piece of yellow broom; for they do say that death comes with it if it is brought into the house in blossom during the month of May'.

Silene dioica (L.) Clairv., RED CAMPION (2)

Blodyn Neidr (snake flower) - campion - used to be one of my favourite flowers, but my grandmother was convinced that I would be attacked by a snake if I brought it into the house.

(from Elsie Morgan of Bow Street, Dyfed, March 1984; translated from the Welsh and communicated by the staff of the Welsh Folk Museum).

We called this pink flower Blonde Trane (Blodyn Taranau: Thunder Flower) as it was believed that a storm of thunder and lightning would follow if it was picked.

(from Mrs J. Mona Jones of Garth, Gwynedd, April 1984, referring to Cnwch Coch, near Aberystwyth, c. 1921-1935; plant identified by, and item translated from the Welsh and communicated by the staff of the Welsh Folk Museum).

Solidago vigaurea L., GOLDEN ROD (2)

I took some golden rod to a friend, and she went mad, she wouldn't have it in the house at any price, and she thought it unlucky to have it in the garden even.

(from Mrs Burrows of Allenton, Derbyshire; received from Brian Rich, March 1983).

Sorbus aucuparia L., MOUNTAIN ASH, ROWAN (4)

Conversation between Dorothy Nesbitt and Joan Baker (both aged c. 52 and remembering their childhood in Accrington, Lancashire) and Jacqueline Simpson, March 1982:

D.N.: One must never transplant a rowan.

J.B.: Some people won't have rowan in the garden I know one woman who refused to buy a house which she liked in every other way, because it had two rowans.

J.S.: Couldn't she have had them cut down?

J.B.: That would be as bad as transplanting them.

(from Dr Jacqueline Simpson of Worthing, Sussex, March 1982).

A rowan tree is good to have growing in the garden, or nearby, because it wards off the influence of witches.

(from Mrs C.I. Boyd Brent of Ashreigney, Devon, July 1983).

Of 70 Accrington schoolchildren (11-14-year-olds) who answered a questionnaire, one reported: 'Unlucky to transplant mountain ash, or bring cuttings into the house.

(from Mrs Susan Allonby of Nelson, Lancashire, August 1983).

Despite the two items from Accrington, rowan trees are widely considered to provide protection against witchcraft and evil:

.... The Rowan or Mountain Ash tree is said to be the home of good fairies. I have one growing in my garden given to me by my mother after I got married.

(from Maura Walsh of Dromsally, Co. Limerick, October 1984).

Syringa vulgris L., LILAC (58)

I remember visiting an old lady, about 1970, who had a lovely white lilac in her garden. Something she said about it being difficult for her to get into the garden made me offer to go and pick her some lilac, as it was in flower. She made all sorts of excuses to stop me, and finally said it was unlucky to bring any indoors. She was from Lancashire originally, but had lived in Worthing for very many years.

(from Dr Jacqueline Simpson of Worthing, Sussex, February 1982).

I don't know if we have ever said for farming: 'Never buy calves when the lilac is out as it is the dearest time, and they are most likely to scour.' This seems to be true, but I suppose the scour part comes in as the cows are then on lush grass, and the milk is richer.

(from Elsie Vickery of Thorncombe, Dorset, May 1982. Scour: an acute form of diarrhoea).

Lilac: generally unlucky, although no reason

given: Perthshire (Dundee area), Staffs, London (Walthamstow) florists here do not use it for that reason.

(from Bob and Heather Press of Stevenage, Hertfordshire, May 1982. About a week before contributing this, Bob recalled that the only time he remembers visiting his grandfather's grave was when they went to put the first lilac blossom on it each year).

A friend told me that his mother, a school teacher, did not bring lilacs into the school because they make the children sleepy.

I made quite a search on the odor from lilacs but could find no information on this matter, nor any evidence from the extensive literature on lilac perfume chemistry.

(from Dr Lawrence J. King of Geneseo, New York, U.S.A., June 1982).

A friend whose grandmother and mother come from Essex tells me that if they carried lilac through the house - e.g. from back garden through the house

and out to the road, presumably for a non-superstitious friend - the lilac was either covered with a paper bag or even under an umbrella (they were not superstitious about umbrellas open in the house apparently).

(from Janet Thumwood of Maida Vale, London, December 1982).

My mother (born in Littleport, Cambridgeshire) thought that having white lilac in the house was a sure way of bringing about some dreadful disaster. Yet it was quite permissible to have a vase of mauve lilac in the house.

(from Mrs Jo Germany of Lowfields, Cambridge, January 1983).

My mother was very superstitious about flowers: may blossom, lilac and mimosa. .... I never understood why, but it seems to date back to the depression days. When my father was thrown out of work and a neighbour remarked 'what do you expect with lilac and may in the house'.

(from Mrs E.M. Jones of Bayswater, London,

July 1983).

I was born and brought up on a farm in Southern Ireland (Longford). Forbidden flowers - plants etc. - as I remember from preparing May Altars: Purple Lilac - unlucky for house. ....

(from Mrs Colette Prendergast of Southfields, London, April 1984).

From two of a group of 12 very elderly people who meet at Redhills Hospital, Exeter:

A neighbour caught his hand in some timber, blood poisoning set in and by evening he was dead. That morning his wife had filled every room in the house with white lilac. Parents called their house 'Lilac' and they grew a white lilac in the garden. Their eldest son died there when he was four months old. They moved.

(from Mrs Margaret A. Valk of Exeter, Devon, July 1984).

From the material assembled it would appear that white lilac is more widely feared than purple. This fear seems to be due to the flower's strong scent:

I've only heard of lilac being unlucky, I've always heard that it's unlucky. It has such a sweet scent, it's alright for us, but for people who are sick it's too much. Also bees don't like lilac and some rhododendrons.

(from Mrs A. Zeylstra of the School of Herbal Medicine, Tunbridge Wells, Kent, March 1983).

Taraxacum officinale Weber, agg., DANDELION (27)

When I was a child in Brixton (1950's) we believed that if you picked dandelion flowers you would wet your bed.

(from Steve Barton of St Albans, Hertfordshire, November 1979).

Three members of a group of 12 very elderly people who meet at Redhills Hospital Hospital, Exeter, had heard that if you pick dandelions it is said you will wet your bed! Mothers remove the dandelions from children's bunches of wild flowers for this reason, and children tease other children by putting dandelions in their pockets. No evidence

of anything drastic actually happening.

(from Mrs Margaret A. Valk of Exeter, Devon, July 1984).

Although this belief is absent from many parts of the country, it is perhaps the most widely known item of plant-lore in urban schools. British names for the dandelion include Piss-a-bed, Pee-the-beds and the Guernesiais du pissenlliet. Continental names, such as the Dutch pisse-bed and the French pissenlit reveal knowledge of the belief throughout much of northern Europe.

Trifolium sp., CLOVER (3)

I was given a plant of four-leaved clover (a pretty little rock plant with variegated leaves) and told to plant it in my garden. Should it not flourish I would have bad luck, but luckily for me it thrived. I have now moved to another house and have left the plant behind. I am told that I have to be given a root myself! All this knowledge actually comes from the original donor who was a life long farmer!

(from Mrs V.M. Beeson of Marston Montgomery, Derbyshire, received from Brian Rich, March 1983).

.... Another thing in Ireland that several people count unlucky is the four-leaf clover. I remember one year that I couldn't put a foot down but I picked up a four-leaf clover. Then one Sunday in church I had these clovers in my prayer-book and a lady sitting near me whispered 'Get rid of those quickly - they bring bad luck' and speaking for myself I couldn't think that I had any good luck while I had them.

(from Mrs Mary McGovern of Ballaghadereen, Co. Roscommon, October 1984).

The second of these is unusual in that four-leaved clovers are widely considered to be 'lucky', and clover plants which bear leaves with four leaflets are grown commercially to provide 'good luck novelties' (Observer Magazine, 4 August 1974).

Typha latifolia L., BULRUSH (3)

Bulrush - near River Itchen, Winchester, Hants, in Irish household, about 1967/8. Child brought bulrushes into house and same day scalded herself with kettle of boiling water. An aunt who was visiting (southern Irish origin) immediately broke the bulrushes into pieces and threw them out of the house saying they were the cause of the accident. Told to me by the child's mother.

(from Elizabeth J. Rich of Five Ashes, East Sussex, March 1983).

Bulrushes may be considered unlucky because they grow in marshy situations so that children who gather them are exposed to danger. Seeding bulrushes, which are most often picked for decorative purposes, have a tendency to disintegrate releasing masses of down, much to the dismay of houseproud housewives.

Ulex europaeus L., GORSE (4)

A London school teacher in her early 20's attending a 'Plants in Folklore' course at the British Museum (Natural History), London, in October 1979,

recalled that at the first school which she attended as a child, in Hampshire (Ringwood area) children were afraid to touch gorse flowers, because they believed that dragons lived (or were born) in them.

(from Roy Vickery, March 1982).

Cf. Geranium robertianum and Silene dioica above. Extensive enquiries have revealed no further information about this belief.

As a Guernsey-born woman - though not of Guernsey blood .... May, of course, should never be brought indoors - gorse and lilac both of these were considered unlucky. As a child I was never allowed to bring any of these indoors.

(from Miss Winifred R. Bush of Rohair, Guernsey, April 1984).

This would appear to be an extension of the more widespread belief which forbids the closely related broom (Sarothamnus scoparius) from being taken indoors.

Veronica spp. (especially V. chamaedrys L.), SPEEDWELL (1)

As a small child, I believed that if I picked the small blue flower - speedwell? - birds would come and peck my eyes out - this I'm sure came from other children's tales of horror, we used to call the flower Bird's eye.

(from Julia Bedford of Wigston Magna, Leicestershire, July 1983).

WHITE FLOWERS (4)

When I was a child in rural Norfolk any white flowers were known as 'funeral flowers', and we were not allowed to bring them indoors.

(from Jennifer Chandler of Islington, London, May 1984).

White flowers are frequently considered to be most appropriate for funeral tributes, hence they are considered unsuitable for domestic floral decorations.

Zantedeschia aethiopica (L.) K. Spreng. ARUM LILY (15)

To bring arum lilies into a hospital must never be done, as they are a sign of death !!

(from Mrs Mary Hunt of East Grinstead, Sussex, May 1982).

In 1946, following demobilisation from the Royal Navy, I emigrated to New Zealand. I was lucky enough to obtain an apartment in St Heliers Bay, Auckland. The rent included the garden, the maintenance of which I took over.

At the bottom, in a sort of wild corner, was an enormous spread of arum lilies. They were breathtaking in their beauty, and finding a huge vase, which stood on the floor, I cut some of the lilies and arranged them to make a pleasant display. Next day, my landlady arrived to check that I had everything I wanted in the way of linen, cutlery, etc. On entering the living room, her hands flew to her mouth and she cried out: 'Oh, whatever have you done!' She turned to me, eyes blazing: 'You've brought arum lilies into the house. Don't you know

you must never do that? They mean there will be a death in the house.'

I confessed my ignorance of this 'old wives' tale' and said they looked so beautiful I could not resist bringing them in. She said that in New Zealand arum lilies grew like weeds and were treated as such. When she told a neighbour what I had done, the other woman actually crossed herself, so, needless to say, I did not do that again!

(from Peter Allen of Lipson, Devon, July 1983).

Another example of a flower primarily associated with mourning being considered unsafe to use at other times.

Appendix

Information was also received on the following plants, not included in the main list:

Acer campestre L. (maple), Aesculus hippocastanum L. (horse chestnut), Allium porrum L. (leek), A. schoenoprasum (chives), Alnus glutinosa (L.) Gaertn. (alder), Althaea rosea (L.) Cav. (hollyhock), Amaryllis belladonna L. (belladonna lily), Anemone spp. (anemone), Castanea sativa Miller (chestnut), Chamaenerion angustifolium (L.) Scop. (rosebay willowherb), Chrysanthemum leucanthemum L. (ox-eye daisy), Conium maculatum L. (hemlock), Convallaria majalis L. (lily of the valley), Corylus avellana L. (hazel), Dianthus caryophyllus L. (carnation), Endymion non-scriptus (L.) Garke (bluebell), Fagus sylvatica L. (beech), Forsythia sp. (forsythia), Heracleum sphondylium L. (hogweed), Hyacinthus sp. (hyacinth), Jasminum sp. (jasmine), Laburnum anagyroides Medic. (laburnum), Laurus nobilis L. (bay), Malus sp. (apple) M. sylvestris Miller (crab apple), Myrtus communis L. (myrtle), Orchis mascula (L.) L. (early purple

orchid), Paeonia spp. (peony), Papaver spp. (poppy), Petroselinum crispum (Miller) A.W. Hill (parsley), Plantago sp. (plantain), Ranunculus spp. (buttercup), Rhodendron spp. (rhododendron), Ribes sanguineum Pursh (flowering currant), Rosa sp. (rose), Rosmarinus officinalis L. (rosemary), Rumex sp. (dock), Taxus baccata L. (yew), Thymus vulgaris L. (thyme), Tulipa gesnerana L. (tulip), Urtica dioica L. (stinging nettle), Vicia faba L. (broadbean), Viola ? odorata L. (violet), Viscum album L. (mistletoe) and Vitis vinifera L. (grape vine).

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Appendix II

Vernacular names included in the main list and their scientific equivalents.

arum lily - see Zantedeschia aethiopica

bindweed - Convolvulus arvensis

blackberry - see Rubus fruticocus

blackthorn - see Prunus spinosa

bog asphodel - see Narthecium ossifragum

broom - see Sarothamnus scoparius

bulrush - see Typha latifolia

chrysanthemum - see Chrysanthemum morifoium

clover - see Trifolium sp.

cow parsley - see Anthriscus sylvestris

cuckoo pint - see Arum maculatum

daffodil - see Narcissus spp.

dandelion - see Taraxacum officinale

elder - see Sambucus nigra

fool's parsley - see Aethusa cynapium

foxglove - see Digitalis purpurea

golden rod - see Solidago vigaurea

gorse - see Ulex europaeus

hawthorn - see Crataegus spp.

heather - see Erica cinerea

herb robert - see Geranium robertianum

holly - see Ilex aquifolia

honeysuckle - see Lonicera periclymenum

ivy - see Hedera helix

kingcup - see Caltha palustris

lilac - see Syringa vulgaris

lily - see Lilium spp.

mandrake - see Mandragora officinarum

marsh marigold - see Caltha palustris

may - see Crataegus spp.

may flower - see Caltha palustris

meadowsweet - see Filipendula ulmaria

mimosa - see Acacia spp.

mock orange - see Philadelphus coronarius

mother die - see Aethusa cynapium, Anthriscus sylvestris

mountain ash - see Sorbus aucuparia

palm - see Salix caprea

primrose - see Primula vulgaris

privet - see Ligustrum ovalifolium

Queen Anne's lace - see Anthriscus sylvestris

red campion - see Silene dioica

rowan - see Sorbus aucuparia

sallow - see Salix caprea

shepherd's purse - see Capsella bursa-pastoris

snowdrop - see Galanthus nivalis

speedwell - see Veronica spp.

stag's horn sumac - see Rhus typhina

tramman - see Sambucus nigra

wake robin - see Arum maculatum

wattle - see Acacia spp.

whitethorn - see Crataegus spp.

willow - see Salix spp.

yellow water lily - see Nuphar lutea

Any comments or additional information would be gratefully received, and should be sent to:

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U.K.

Throughout the British Isles it is widely believed that certain plants can cause misfortune if they are picked or taken indoors. As the result of a survey conducted by members of the Folklore Society in 1982–1984 a list of over 70 such plants was compiled. This volume gives a summary of the information received, together with a number of historical and other comments. Thus it provides a vivid commentary on an important aspect of current folk belief.

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